

PERCEPTIONS OF *PLATOON* VIETNAM MYTH  
OR VIETNAM REALITY

By

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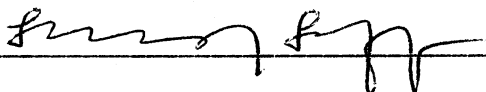
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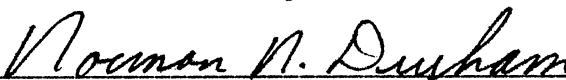
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## CHAPTER I

### INTRODUCTION

#### Film and Society

In a widely used anthology, *Hollywood as Historian*, the editor notes that "Hollywood's myths and symbols are permanent features of America's historical consciousness" (Rollins 1). Rollins tells us that "without intending" to be historical, "Hollywood has often been an unwitting recorder of national moods" (1). Similarly, Arthur M. Schlesinger, Jr. feels that, because film is a "supremely popular art," it is guaranteed to be "a carrier of deep if enigmatic truth" (ix). Schlesinger adds that the "collective effort and collective response" of film insures that it will be "intimately interwoven with the *mentalité* of the society" (x). The film that is "interwoven with the *mentalité* of its society will here be called a "collective narrative." The *mentalité* of society will here be called the "collective consciousness."

The idea that societies possess something of a collective personality is a commonly held, if not overtly stated, notion of our post-Freudian world. To begin discussing this integrated, group personality it must be given a name--the collective consciousness--and a definition: the collective consciousness is the self-image of *the group*

which involves an awareness of *the group*; an awareness of the Zeitgeist; and an awareness of history, tradition, and ideology--social memory. While the individual is composed of a singular personality, he also maintains a social personality, a collective self-image. The collective self-conscious, because it is also a manifestation of the mind, suffers from many of the same conditions the individual psyche does: guilt, fear, repression. The more positive social emotions like patriotism and brotherhood are also elements of the collective conscious.

The idea that stories reflect and contribute to a society's collective consciousness is a commonly held, if difficult to prove, notion of our modern world. The collective narrative is a film, novel, folk tale--any form of narrative--which embodies and forms the collective ideology or self-image of the group. The collective narrative both reflects the already established collective self-image (convention, tradition) while at the same time projecting new or altered images of the collective self-image (invention, revolution). The collective narrative both mirrors *and* manipulates the collective conscious.

The motion picture *Platoon* is a powerful narrative which spoke to the collective self-image of America in 1986. The film was a mirror reflecting part of America's conception of the war while at the same time altering it through the narrative experience provided by the picture. After its release, *Platoon* was praised by some as a realistic depiction of the Vietnam War; on the other hand, others condemned it as a melodramatic over-simplification of the war. This essay will examine



*Platoon* and the diametrically opposed reactions.

## CHAPTER II

### *PLATOON*: VIETNAM AS IT REALLY WAS

Time magazine published a cover story about it [*Platoon*] and the headline said: "Vietnam As It Really Was." This is silly and decadent, this willful confusion of life and art. And it's dangerous. War is too wildly stupid, glorious, hideous, huge and human for us to think that art can tell us what it really is. War is a little like God--when we start thinking we understand it, we're heading for trouble.

(Henry Allen, *Washington Post*)

A quarter-century after the first two Americans were killed in Vietnam during a rocket attack near Bien Hoa in 1959, Hollywood released its first widely successful Vietnam film. More popular than any Vietnam film before it, *Platoon* became, for many, an acceptable cinematic representation of a confusing and hotly debated war. As the first film to present a simple narrative that was not merely nihilistic and brutal nor obscure and "artsy," *Platoon* filled a void in American culture. By adopting culturally resonant narrative patterns--the *Bildungsroman*; the allegorical battle between good and evil; and the classic tragic structure--*Platoon*, like the best Hollywood films, "felt" right to millions of Americans. Viewers had seen it all before somewhere: in evening news reports from the war, in old WWII movies, and--more distantly--the 19th century epic, Melville's *Moby Dick*, one of director Oliver Stone's self-professed influences.

In a January cover story, *Time* magazine's Richard Corliss suggested the film had "captivated intellectuals, movie buffs, and urban grunts," and showed "astonishing, across-the-board appeal" (56). Corliss continued dramatically: "*Platoon* the picture is now *Platoon* the phenomenon" (56). Not only did the film garner over \$140 million at the box office, but its per-screen average for the January 9-11, 1987, weekend was \$22,000 (Corliss 56), the highest ever for a new film. What this figure suggests is that Americans stood in line, packed into seventy-four different theatres across the country, and then went home and told their friends to do the same. *Platoon* was embraced as a "great American movie" (Denby 86). Director Oliver Stone had found a myth, or lived a myth, or coopted an ideology that would sell, and Hollywood and America had finally achieved two-way communication, a mutual dialogue about Vietnam, only a quarter of a century after the fact (Smith 11-13).

Ultimately, *Platoon* was nominated for eight Academy Awards (Bernstein 49), winning four, including the best picture and best director categories. Oliver Stone told the world-wide Academy audience that night: "I think what you're saying is that for the first time you really understand what happened over there" (Wilhelm 101). And Alvin P. Sanoff, writing for *U.S. News & World Report*, gave *Platoon* equal billing with the "new generation of textbooks" and "innovative teaching methods" for "casting Vietnam in a more realistic light," and "demystifying a conflict that to most students seems as distant as the Peloponnesian War" (58). One reviewer recommended seeing *Platoon* not just because it was "an important film," but because it was "an important cultural

event" (Rosenbaum 97). One reviewer suggested that "No sane person should want to get any closer to war than this film" (Novak 8).

But this majority view of the film did not go unopposed. Equally competent and respected critics found the film "overtly allegorical," and "blatantly idealized and mythologized" (Prasch 195). Pauline Kael suggested the film utilized "too much poetic license," "too much filtered light," and "too much romanticized insanity" (95). She called the film "inflated," "overwrought," "melodramatic," and "a bit much" (95). John Simon, writing for the *National Review*, echoed Kael's feelings, but with more vituperation:

The amazing thing about *Platoon* is that Oliver Stone, the writer-director, who spent 15 months fighting in Vietnam, managed to make a film scarcely different from the soap operas written by hacks who never got closer to the VC than their VCRs. (54)

Simon's perception of the film dramatically contrasts with Peter Blauner's feeling that "*Platoon* is about the real place and the real time" (62). What accounted for these two, sharply distinct "readings" of *Platoon*?

## CHAPTER III

### *PLATOON'S "REALISM"*

Much of the promotional material for *Platoon* took advantage of Oliver Stone's personal combat experience, stressing the autobiographical nature of his film. Indeed, many of the early reviews of *Platoon* spend as much time reviewing Stone's own experience in Vietnam as they do the production. Stone used his authority as an historical witness to promote his film. In a February, 1988 *Playboy* magazine interview Stone said he learned the "score" in Vietnam from the "black guys" who didn't buy into the "Pentagon bullshit." The "score," Stone learned, was that "We've been fucked, and we are over here in Vietnam" (57). The *Playboy* interviewer then asked, "Did knowing the score mean you dropped your Cold War view of the world?" Stone replied quickly: "Well, let's say it went into abeyance during the war" (57). Ironically, both Oliver Stone and *Platoon's* young Chris Taylor (played by Charlie Sheen) enlisted for service in Vietnam.

Without a purpose for serving or dying in Vietnam, without the Cold War world view, Vietnam became to Stone and much of the country a place where Americans were "wasted." This "lesson" is reflected in *Platoon* when the Southern black, "King" (played by Kieth David), dubs Chris Taylor "crusader" for dropping out of college and joining the Army.

King, a "grunt" for life because of his background, reminds Taylor that "you gotta be rich in the first place to think like that." "Thinking like that" involves any idealism not rooted in King's wonderful Black English adage that the "poor are always being fucked over by the rich; always has, always will." The implication made throughout the film is that "grunts," like the poor, have been told by the rich where to go (Vietnam) and what to do (die in "their" war). Vietnam was a blue collar war, but *Platoon* implies that the working men fighting in Vietnam are fully enslaved. Disgruntled draftees are the norm; dedicated volunteers and career soldiers are missing in *Platoon*. The utter hellishness of *Platoon's* Vietnam is further reflected, quite subtly, near the end of the film by the expression of blank horror that fills the face of "superlifer" Sergeant O'Neill after being given command of a platoon. Stone holds the shot on O'Neill's face (actor John C. McGinley) a good five seconds longer than needed. Positioned as it is at the very end of the film, this shot serves as one final, haunted exclamation of Stone's vision of Vietnam as an unmitigated torture.

The score, then, the "bottom line" in *Platoon*, is that Vietnam is a place where the innocent and the ignorant wait out their tour of duty as if it were a prison sentence. The soldiers of *Platoon* literally "do time" as one would in jail by counting backwards the days of their one year tour of duty: "Broke a hundred the other day," Crawford the Californian says, "Ninety-two left to go, man; April seventeenth; zeros, man, then home to California . . . ." The soldier's attention to the number of days left in his tour was a common concern in Vietnam. To be

"short," to be a "short timer" was to be near the end of your 365-day tour. *Platoon* adopts this historical fact and accentuates and develops it to support a prison-like view of Vietnam. The viewers who already subscribed to this view of the Vietnam War and those predisposed to accept Vietnam as a Dantesque landscape could then adopt *Platoon* as an acceptable collective narrative of the war. Personal ideology meshed with popular art.

When *Platoon* began to receive the "endorsement" of the war's veterans and authorities, it took on greater and greater power as a collective narrative:

Oliver Stone . . . has created a work so overflowing with detail that, upon exiting, moviegoers may feel they had served a tour of duty too. For veterans, of course, the experience is that much more compelling. "It was like going back and forth into reality--in the movie and then in the field," said Chris DiAngelo of New York City. "I couldn't get myself together afterward. A good friend of mine, we had to carry him out. It's hard even now to talk about it." (Bruning 7)

For those who were never there, praise from Ancient Mariner-like witnessess of the war would indeed be persuasive. How can one who has not "seen" the war question the "seer"?

Stone made the most of his authority as a veteran. He praised his film as one that could show "kids--if they see the movie, and I hope they do--what combat is really like and what war really means" (Blauner

62). And so *Platoon* was offered as a "message film" which could teach viewers "what war really means." For those who shared the film's ideological message, the movie's illusion of reality was maintained and the infantry platoon's story was a compelling microcosm.

For those who praised *Platoon*, its "realism" became the film's most touted element:

*Platoon* . . . resonates with such thunderous authenticity that one fairly expects chandeliers in the theatre lobby to shatter. The story advances with a formidable logic. Not a sequence seems out of place, not an event contrived. Pace is geared to the rhythm of war--the fighting and then the hours spent waiting to fight again. Characters are meticulously rendered and, even when shocking, their behavior is credible. (Bruning 7)

Bruning is not praising cinéma vérité or a pure documentary technique, but a *dramatic realism*. Bruning let *Platoon* embody the Vietnam combat experience for him. Since *Platoon* did not appear overtly ideological, but merely a reflection of "formidable logic" and "credibility," *Platoon* was, for Bruning and many others, a work of art embodying basic truths about a complex and confused time in American history.

Other authorities and veterans of the war found *Platoon* an artistic reflection of truth: "When people ask what it [Vietnam] was like, you can point to that film and say, 'That's what it was like'" (McCombs B4). This endowment of *Platoon* with historical status resulted, in part,



because America did not yet have a popular narrative which had successfully reflected collective ideology. Charles Maland has written of *Dr. Strangelove* (1964) as a response to the "paradigm Ideology of Liberal Consensus" then holding sway in America (191). *Platoon*, though, seems to have worked, not as a response to the paradigm Ideology of Liberal Consensus in America, but as a reflection of it.

There had been some noted Vietnam films and novels before *Platoon*, but they were never adopted or saluted as collective narratives. Films like *Apocalypse Now* were popular, yet remained limited cultural narratives. But *Platoon*, unlike all the other Vietnam films, became a cause célèbre among critics:

[*Platoon* is] in its combined intimacy and emotional complexity, a charged response, on the one side, to such grandiose and impersonal art visions of the war as *Apocalypse Now* and *The Deer Hunter*, and on the other, to such dumb-whore movies as *Rambo*. (Denby 86)

And Paul Attanasio wrote similarly in the *Washington Post*:

This is not the Vietnam of op-ed writers, rabble-rousers or esthetic visionaries, not Vietnam-as-metaphor or Vietnam-the-way-it-should-have-been. It is a movie about Vietnam as it was, alive with authenticity, seen through the eyes of a master filmmaker who lost his innocence there (B1)

This is praise for politically correct filmmaking.

When asked if *Platoon* would have been a success if released eight years earlier, Stone acknowledged the importance of timing: "[*Platoon*] became an antidote to *Top Gun* and *Rambo*. It's an antidote to Reagan's wars against Libya, Grenada and Nicaragua. It makes people remember what war is really like" (58). Michael Kinsley added in his commentary: "A friend of mine argues that the movie [*Platoon*] wouldn't have been a success six months ago, before Oliver North gave extremism in the defense of liberty a bad name" (4). Kinsley also noted that the film seemed to benefit by appearing just after the "insider trading mess on Wall Street" (Stone's next motion picture portrait of America would, of course, be *Wall Street*).

## CHAPTER IV

### TURNING THE WWII COMBAT FILM UPSIDE DOWN:

#### *BATAAN* (1943) and *PLATOON* (1986)

Jeanine Basinger, in her impressive work *The World War II Combat Film: Anatomy of a Genre*, has called *Bataan* (1943) a "seminal film." *Bataan*, also acclaimed for its "gritty realism," bears striking similarities to, and shows some revealing differences from, its cinematic grandchild, *Platoon*. Based on America's early setbacks in the Philippines during WWII, *Bataan's* format is, Basinger notes, of the "hold-the-fort" variety. Her other major category for the combat film is the "roving, take-the-objective format" (51). *Platoon* is interesting in that it uses both of Basinger's basic combat film formats. *Platoon* begins with endless day and night patrols into the jungle, and then ends with the platoon attempting to "hold the fort" along the Cambodian border. In the end, both the fort in *Bataan* and *Platoon* are overrun by a numberless Asian enemy, but, in *Platoon*, a napalm air strike saves Chris Taylor and a few of his companions. In *Bataan*, all die, but while fighting for time in a righteous cause which will ultimately prevail.

There are two crucial differences between *Platoon* and WWII films like *Bataan*. First, in *Platoon's* "take-the-objective" sequence, there is clearly no articulated goal. Second, in *Platoon's* "hold-the-fort"

sequence there is no stated or implied reason to hold the fort beyond mere self-preservation. In *Bataan*, the men fight and die "for freedom," and "to save the world." At the film's close, an omniscient narrator explains: "So fought the heroes of Bataan. Their sacrifice made possible our own victories in the Coral and Bismark Seas, Midway, New Guinea and Guadalcanal. Their spirit will lead us back to Bataan!" *Bataan's* opening dedication suggests, "Ninety-six priceless days were bought for us--with their lives . . . ."

*Platoon*, in stark ideological contrast, offers no objective, no stated mission, no duty, no sacrifice. *Platoon's* final title is as stark as the Vietnam Veterans Memorial: "Dedicated to the men who fought and died in Vietnam War." The men of *Bataan* also have a tactical objective: "demolish a bridge and prevent a Japanese breakthrough at all costs. In so doing they will buy time for MacArthur so the war in the Philippines won't be 'over too soon'" (56).

*Platoon* remarkably contrasts with the overt propaganda of the WWII film. In one powerful scene, Elias and Chris sit outside, talking philosophically, side-by-side, looking up at the stars. Earlier that day Elias had stopped Sergeant Barnes from killing a Vietnamese girl; Chris had likewise stopped four of his fellow soldiers from an act of rape. They are bonded together now, father and son. Elias confesses to his young friend, "We're going to lose this war." Chris, shocked, asks "C'mon you really think so? Us?" Elias answers prophetically, "We've been kickin' other peoples' asses for so long I figure it's time we got ours kicked." And so, in *Platoon*, the "Why-We-Fight" element of many

WWII films is not only missing, but subverted by a "Why-We-Will-Lose" mentality.

The most noted genre feature of the WWII combat film, the "melting pot" theme, was established in *Bataan*. Basinger provides a long description of *Bataan's* melting pot, worth quoting in length for its extreme similarities with *Platoon's* melting pot and for its two stark differences:

Thirteen men are trapped in a situation. They come from different parts of the United States, and from different branches of the service. They are different in age, background, experience, attitude, and willingness to fight. "They're a mixed group," says the Captain. "They've never served together before." In establishing such a collection of misfits (who will be assembled into a coherent fighting group), the film confirms and makes specific the foundation of the combat patrols to follow. These men obviously represent the American melting pot, but the representation is not a simple-minded one. Our strength is our weakness and vice versa. We are a mongrel nation--ragtail, unprepared, disorganized, quarrelsome among ourselves, and with separate special interests, raised, as we are, to believe in the individual, not the group. At the same time, we bring different skills and abilities together for the common good, and from these separate needs and backgrounds we bring a

feisty determination. No one leads us who is not strong, and our individualism is not set aside for any small cause. Once it is set aside, however, our group power is extreme. (51)

This melting pot theme is now so strongly a part of the war film genre that it is difficult to imagine it ever exhausting itself.

This description of *Bataan's* melting pot seems also to be a major element of the American Dream. In *Platoon*, the "collection of misfits" are *never* "assembled into a coherent fighting group," and the platoon itself, *does not* become more racially compatible, more professional, and more team-like through the course of the film, as it would in the classic WWII film. In *Platoon*, the evolution is from order and professionalism to the chaos of "fraggings" (murder of one's own comrades). This open conflict causes the narrator, Chris Taylor, to comment: "I can't believe we're fighting each other when we should be fighting the enemy." Within the context of the prior American combat films, the very title of Stone's film--*Platoon*--becomes an ironic comment, an "inversion" (Kane 98) of the cinematically inspired and positive connotations of the word. *Platoon* also shows the failure to set aside American "individualism" to reach "group power" (51).

Unproductive individualism is flaunted in *Platoon*; drug use (alcohol for one group, marijuana for the other); racial differences; Sergeants fighting over orders and tactics; fistfights between men; and officers bickering with troops. *Platoon*, then, shows the disintegration of the WWII combat melting pot, the limitations of the "one nation,

indivisible" element of the American Dream, and the exploding racial problem and generation gap of the 1960s.

Vincent Canby likewise noted that *Platoon* "comes out of a long tradition of 'war' movies . . . It also uses a number of war-movie conventions, but so effectively that it's as if they'd been reinvented" (21). This reworking also involved inverting the John Wayne-like hero of the WWII film. In the WWII film, the good, but tough drill instructor (or sergeant) takes civilians into his platoon and makes men of them. The reverse occurs in *Platoon* where the good sergeant is compassionate, the bad one is tough and tight-lipped. Staff Sergeant Barnes is so tough he shoots one of his own men (Elias) and attempts to bludgeon another (Chris) to death. In the classic combat film, the hero often risks his life to save the "green" and inexperienced soldiers. Except for *Platoon's* Sergeant Elias, the green recruits, now dubbed "cherries," are treated like "fresh meat." John Wayne might give his young understudy a verbal dressing down after he has saved his life, but he does not make him walk point as Barnes does in *Platoon* with the "cherry" Gardner, nor put him on a dangerous night ambush. Gardner is killed on that patrol. But before his body is cold, Barnes gives the conventional let-us-learn-from-our-fallen-comrade speech found in many combat films. The subversive element here, though, is that Barnes refers to Gardner's body as a "lump of shit." The final irony is that Barnes was the one who put the inexperienced Gardner and Taylor on the ambush: Gardner dies; Taylor is wounded. In *Platoon*, the tough sergeant does not make sacrifices to save his young soldiers, but,

instead, coldly sacrifices them. As Elias tells Barnes, "The man would be alive if he had a few more days to learn something."

By 1986 many Americans were prepared to see John Wayne, the WWII combat film, and the Cold War world view inverted, satirized, and destroyed. For the audience that accepted this inversion of post WWII Cold War ideology, *Platoon* was a reflection of reality, the truth, "the way it was."



## CHAPTER V

### PLATOON'S VIETNAM LESSONS

That painful experience still holds many lessons for Americans; perhaps now we are ready to learn some of them and perhaps the new movies will help (*The New York Times*, 1977)

A number of experts doubt that the U.S. can evolve any common view of Viet Nam and its lessons for many years to come. (George Church writing in *Time* magazine, 1985, 40)

*Platoon* answers two questions that have haunted the American conscious since the early 1970s: first, how could a First World, technological giant lose a war to a Third World nation? Second, how could American boys commit My-Lai-style atrocities? While every Vietnam combat film offered answers to that first question, and many addressed the brutality question, *Platoon* phrased its answers acceptable to a mass audience. The collective guilt associated with incidents like the My Lai massacre seemed particularly intense. Stone's film addressed this national guilt and worked through it cathartically. Of course, not all of Stone's audience felt guilty to begin with, and for those Americans, the focus on atrocities seemed but a smear of the American fighting man.

*Platoon* answers the question of why we lost by presenting Viet Cong and North Vietnamese soldiers as omnipresent and nearly omnipotent. The audience, like the American soldiers in the film, seldom sees the enemy.

The young Chris encounters his first enemy soldier during a night ambush, but only after he has been staring at what appears to be a tree, shrouded in fog. The tree moves--it's the enemy! Earlier that day Chris and his platoon go stumbling, cursing, and hacking their way through the jungle like New York City tourists, lost in Yosemite; on the other hand, the North Vietnamese who walk into the ambush move like panthers--quiet and lethal. When the audience is privileged to see the enemy, the North Vietnamese outnumber the Americans, overrunning their positions and using kamikaze "sappers" to blow up the American command bunkers. Oliver Stone claims that the final battle scene in *Platoon* was drawn from his own experiences, but, again, movies heighten, condense, and make sense of events--even in the process of presenting personal memories. And *Platoon* is a very good movie.

Another example of the enemy's Third-World craftiness is seen when Sergeant Elias, with pistol and flashlight, crawls into an underground VC retreat, complete with operating room. After watching the American platoon complaining about digging in every night, *Platoon* shows viewers which side was really dug in. Again, Stone has based his script on documented, certified reality here--the VC *did* have massive tunnel systems, sometimes even underneath American installations (Mangold, *Tunnels of Cu Chi*). But the tunnel scene is presented like one of those early scenes in *Alien*: the monster is not seen; he has just left, and only a trace of slime remains. *Platoon's* depiction of the enemy borrows from the Hollywood tradition of the super monster. In the tunnel scene, the VC have left their clothes hanging, their camp pots boiling, but

they've disappeared like some Hollywood blob, only to return at some future, unexpected moment. No doubt similar things happened many times during the Vietnam War; however, it is also known that the VC were sometimes captured with their pants down--literally.

The inability of our own troops to distinguish between villager and VC in the My Lai-like incident in the film leads to open dissension. A split occurs in the platoon which, in exaggerated form, resembles the cultural split back home. Of course this dichotomy is slanted favorably to one side. Michael Kinsley notes that the "political spin of *Platoon* is clearly *Rambo's* opposite" (A19). Kinsley finds the film full of "left-wing signifiers. The bad sergeant drinks bourbon; the good sergeant smokes dope. The bad sergeant is a fever of swaggering macho; the good sergeant is sensitive, caring, even somewhat androgynous" (A19). The 1960s division between the "hip" and the "unhip" is as fully exploited in *Platoon* as it is in *Good Morning Vietnam*. The good guys in *Platoon* are the soldiers dancing to the catchy Motown hits, the bad guys listen to "Okie From Muskogee." Film critic Martha Bayles advised that "Those who denounce the right-wing cartoonishness of the *Rambo* movies ought to take another look at the left-wing cartoonishness of such esteemed films as last year's Oscar-winning *Platoon*" (33). And so *Platoon* was not such an apolitical narrative after all. Michael Kinsley wrote: *Platoon's* "presentation of war as an existential nightmare conveys, in today's political circumstances, an unavoidably left-wing message" (A19).

So *Platoon* answers the core question every Vietnam combat film

addresses, Why did America lose? *Platoon's* answer: We faced a devious Asian enemy (who would stop at nothing as the phrase goes, no doubt from countless old films) who was impossible to identify. By overreaching, a moral struggle developed in America, both in Vietnam and back home, which rent our culture into Jekyll and Hyde segments ("hip and unhip") that left our nation paralyzed and at war with itself. If there is any overt political lesson to be gleaned from *Platoon*, it is most likely that we should simply avoid such "quagmires" in the future. *Platoon* illustrated cinematically the American Left's very malleable adage, "No more Vietnams."

## CHAPTER VI

### THE COLLECTIVE CATHARSIS

Oliver Stone's impassioned, mournful *Platoon* is the kind of Vietnam movie that many of us have longed for and also--in secret, perhaps--dreaded. (David Denby 86)

Working cathartically, *Platoon* was a necessary, but emotionally troubling experience: "*Platoon* is also a tormented and tormenting picture that lacerates one's conscience with the ferocity of a whitehot buzz-saw" (41). Harry Geduld's prose may be overembellished, but it describes, metaphorically, how the viewing of *Platoon* worked as a cathartic experience for many Americans. "This violent, deeply moving elegy of war will leave you shaking" (Ansen 57), another critic warned. How did a film spark such a cultural catharsis?

Simply put, Oliver Stone developed a film drama which returned America to Vietnam, forced it to confront long suppressed fears and guilty memories of that war, and then resolved the issue by killing America's bad side (Sergeant Barnes) before evacuating the audience out of Vietnam in a helicopter with the wiser Chris Taylor. It was a "melodramatic shortcut" (95) as Pauline Kael said; *Platoon* had reduced all the issues of the war to make them fit the tags "good" and "evil" (95)--and that simplification, Kael knows herself, is what truly effective popular narratives accomplish.

By giving guilty Americans an old story they could be comfortable with, melodrama's easily recognized battle between good and evil, and by presenting his "symbolic" and "mythic" story over an ultra-realistic Vietnam-like jungle, in which lurk ultra-realistic soldiers (actors trained in a boot camp of sorts run by former Marine Dale Dye), Stone could please veterans, young moviegoers, and critics who appreciated a well-made film that did not shy away from the difficult questions left unanswered in Vietnam.

The most challenging move Stone made with his film was to show a My Lai-like village incident, and to show how even the young Chris--the character we identify with--comes close to killing a civilian. In this way, Stone made every American who saw the film, limited, but partial accomplices to brutality. The scene opens with Chris' foreboding narration: "The village which had stood for maybe a thousand years, didn't know we were coming that day. If they had, they would have run. Barnes was at the eye of our rage and through him, our Captain Ahab, we would set things right again. That day we loved him."

The platoon slowly moves into the village, weapons at ready. The silence and peacefulness is strangely unsettling. Down toward a streambed, a Vietnamese male in black pajamas flees for the jungle. A villager? a Viet Cong? Barnes shoots him in the back. The Americans walk into the center of the village. Old women, young children, cooking fires, chickens, pigs, thatched huts, rice, and pottery. The "crazy" soldier "Bunny" kills a pig with his shotgun. Barnes drops a smoking grenade in a bunker. The women of the village scream. Inside the

bunker, two people, two children? The grenade explodes. The villagers scream louder. A soldier screams back at them to shut up. Chris forces a one-legged Vietnamese boy to dance as he fires his weapon into the ground at the boy's feet. Chris stops himself. But Bunny murders the boy with the butt of his shotgun. Chris' face contorts in horror.

Outside, the interrogation of the village chief continues. The village chief's wife screams endlessly. Everyone pauses. She yells at the Americans. Barnes coolly shoots her through the head. The yelling stops. In the dreadful silence which prevails, eight different Vietnamese and Americans react to the killing--some with fear, some with shock, some with a strange gleam in their eyes. Barnes grabs the young daughter of the murdered woman. The father cries over his wife's body as Barnes holds a pistol to the daughter's head. He threatens to kill her. The chief screams in a rage that he knows nothing. There is an agonizing pause. Time slows. It is the very center of the story: a horrible wait, a deadly expectation.

Just before an explosion of blood lust, Stone pulls his audience back. Sergeant Elias rushes in and halts the killing. The resulting fight between Barnes and Elias gives Chris and half his platoon--not to mention most of the American audience watching the film--time to identify with the moral stance of Elias.

Throughout this scene, Stone uses close-ups and hand-held camera movement to place his audience "inside" the confusing brutality of Vietnam. But, he then gives his audience a chance to wash its hands of the matter, and, later, when Chris rescues a Vietnamese girl from a gang

rape, the audience begins to feel good again. "Don't do it! Don't do it!" Chris screams as he pulls a soldier off the girl. "She's just a fuckin' dink" the other soldier mutters. Chris screams back, "She's a fuckin' human being, man. Fuck you! Fucking animals!" The "bad word," is used here fourteen times within only thirty-five seconds of screen time. And used equally by Chris and all the rapists. This word has been called the most commonly used adjective in the Vietnam war, and in this scene Stone seems to be stressing the degradation of language and the debasement of men in combat. Even this word, though, cannot fully express the intense moral revulsion Chris feels. Or, in the case of the rapists, their intense hatred of Chris.

Ron Rosenbaum called the village scene in *Platoon* "the single most illuminating one ever made about the particular viciousness of the Vietnam War" (98). For viewers and critics who felt all along that Vietnam was "particularly vicious," then *Platoon's* cathartic and dramatic return to My-Lai could not help but be a powerfully emotional experience. Viewers did not necessarily need be familiar with Vietnam to feel as if they had "experienced" a situation of emotional moral conflict. The scene, as does *Platoon* in general, seems to work as well with the Woodstock generation as it does with the video generation. And, ultimately, whatever a viewer's ideology or view of the war, the film's dramatic reenactment of historically based atrocity forces the viewer into a personal, emotional, and intellectual questioning: Would I have pulled the trigger? Would I have stopped the killing?

*Platoon* was part history, part autobiography, part fact, part myth,



part allegory, and part revitalized war genre cliché, all buried under a facade of Hollywood combat realism. Because America wanted a Vietnam War story (for perhaps political *and* emotional reasons), *Platoon* initiated an intense discourse with many Americans, particularly those Americans predisposed to see Vietnam as a tragic waste of life.

## CHAPTER VII

### PLATOON AS A FICTIONAL HOUSE OF CARDS

The most complex unraveling of *Platoon's* realism was finally Thomas Prasch's contention that the film used "surface realism" to veil its deep mythic and allegorical praise for the "warrior hero. Prasch found *Platoon* "as dependent upon myths and upon fictions of genre convention as any of the earlier Vietnam movies with which it has been compared" (207). To Prasch, those who find *Platoon* realistic "misread" it, for *Platoon* is, "at its most central levels, a fictional film" (195). Perceiving the artifice of art, having our suspended disbelief reactivated, having the illusion of realism broken before our eyes is one of the most common complaints in all of dramatic criticism. For those critics who saw through the "reality," "realism," and "truthfulness" of *Platoon*, the film's fictional structure tumbled like a house of cards.

Impressively, there seemed to be little middle ground for viewers. *Platoon* either worked, and worked well as an embodiment of truth, or it was unraveled and its fictional structure was used as evidence of deception and dishonesty. Almost every critic who bridled at *Platoon's* artifice did so because the ideological underpinnings of the film became visible. Yet these very critics most likely suspend their disbelief and

accept the artifice of more subtle films all the time. When art reflects *our* truth, artifice is more easily hidden and the illusion of realism more easily sustained: "one man's art is another man's propaganda."

*Platoon's* most often cited fictional element, and the most often used evidence of the film's *unreality*, was the allegorical dimension of the film's two father figures, Sergeant Barnes and Sergeant Elias. This symbolic level is most evident when we witness the operatic death of Sergeant Elias. The audience's view is from above a destroyed church, surrounded by palms and jungle. Elias, left behind, is running from advancing North Vietnamese. Elias' comrades watch in horror from their circling helicopters as the wounded soldier vainly runs. The helicopters return and strafe the enemy, but there are too many. Elias dies in shower of bullets. Stone agonizingly extends the death with slow motion while Samuel Barber's *Adagio* swells loudly. At his death, Elias is filmed in extreme slow motion and through a telephoto lens (giving the image an ethereal quality). His final act on earth is to raise his arms Christ-like to the heavens (ultimately to become the film's primary visual advertisement). It is a fitting death for this tragic hero.

The evil Sergeant Barnes, in dramatic counterpoint, is symbolically rendered during the heat of a vicious night battle. Chris searches Barnes out from the chaos of the fight. Barnes is in a blood-rage, slaying the enemy right and left, hand-to-hand combat. Barnes is shot in both legs, but Chris saves him from a North Vietnamese attacker.

When Chris reaches for Barnes, Barnes attacks Chris! He throws Chris to the ground and jumps atop him, menacingly with an entrenching tool. At this instant, Stone switches to slow motion for Barnes as well. There is an added special effect, though. Barnes is surrounded by shimmering red flames, seeming to glow from the very pits of his eyes: Ahab revealed in all his evil glory. The roar of a jet fighter fills the sound track as a blast of napalm saves Chris from his nemesis. It is an apparent fitting end for this melodramatic villain (Chris does not kill Barnes until the next morning).

Stone himself acknowledged the allegorical dimension of his film. At one point he suggested that *Platoon* represented "heightened reality" (Richman 83). But Stone was never more revealing than when he suggested that he "pushed beyond the factual truth to the spiritual . . . no, to a greater truth. This is the spirit of what I saw happening" (Richman 83). The problem was that many critics and veterans did not agree with Stone's "factual truth" or his "spiritual truth."

## CHAPTER VIII

### "ART IS POLITICS"

Accepted by a majority of viewers, *Platoon's* narrative reflected the American Left's consensus of the Vietnam War as a tragic waste and a reflection of a brutal military establishment destined to fail. Collective narratives, however, including *Platoon's*, may not work for everyone. Those who disbelieve in the ideology underlying the narrative may reject it. And so in the case of *Platoon* and all the Vietnam War films, it was ideology which was the primary determinant of artistic appreciation of the film.

*Platoon* illustrates, as well as any American film, Plato's adage that "Art is Politics." More recently, *Mississippi Burning* raised the issue of ideology in film. This time the leaders of the Civil Rights Movement chastised filmmakers for neglecting the role that non-violent direct action played in the battle against Southern racism. Instead of an historically accurate account, the Helmdale production produced a showbiz solution to Southern bigotry: two tough cops use Dirty-Harry tactics to bamboozle Southern racists. This outside-the-system vigilantism was more familiar to 1980s' movie audiences, but it is no doubt a skewed portrait of the Civil Rights Movement.

Going too far with their critical praise were those who saw *Platoon*

as a perfect distillation of the Vietnam War. Even though *Platoon* became a collective narrative of Vietnam, and even though it touched the collective consciousness, that does not mean it necessarily came any closer to any kind of objective "truth" than the unsuccessful Vietnam films. Cultures, like people, sometimes believe what they want to: the necessary, the convenient, even the enjoyable. Thus, the claims of Stone and others that *Platoon* "tells it like it is" are far too optimistic. Can any film explain the longest and possibly most controversial war this country has ever waged, especially when that war seems to be fragmented into a thousand various experiences?

From a solely artistic point of view, the negative criticism of *Platoon* revealed an unwillingness to follow Coleridge's advice to willingly suspend our disbelief. But disbelief is not easily suspended when personal ideology is being challenged. Many of the extremely positive reviews of *Platoon* went too far the other way and showed not only a healthy suspension of disbelief but an added willingness to endow art with a power we perhaps only wish it had, the ability to transcend time and place, to recapture history, or--in this case--to capture the "Vietnam experience."

Ron Rosenbaum succinctly catalogued the concerns of this thesis when he called *Platoon* "a movie that will likely remake and redefine how the popular imagination regards one of the most divisive conflicts in our history" (98). Rosenbaum went on to discuss *Platoon* as an historical artifact:

In the sense that history is less what happened than what we *think* happened, *Platoon* will not only change the way we think about that part of history, it will, itself, change history. [*Platoon*] has an integrity, a feeling for the truth of the situation that no previous work of film or literature about that dumb episode has had. In some ways it may become the emblematic work of that time, the way *The Grapes of Wrath* (both the novel and the film) has become the emblematic work for the Great Depression. Which is not to say *Platoon* is The Truth, but it's a better version of the truth than the war-as-video-game version of *Top Gun* or the how-I-beat-the-Soviet-army fantasy of *Rambo*. (98)

Rosenbaum has recognized the ambiguous nature of popular myths and cultural narratives, "emblematic works" as he calls them: they *are* far more subjective perspectives of events than traditional history, but they may still serve a greater historical role in our society than the footnoted histories. Popular history is also important because it humanizes and emotionalizes the past and experience for the mass audience. The fact that *Platoon* was helping form history is probably what most bothered the film's harshest critics (and most excited those who wanted an answer to "Rambomania"). For millions of Americans, *Platoon* and all the Vietnam films seem to be serving the primary historical and ideological needs of the collective self-image.

When a motion picture is forced to take on an even greater role as

a cultural document, a historical text, as all our Vietnam films have to date, we force also an unresolvable conflict upon ourselves between factuality and history on the one side, and art and dramatic laws and licenses on the other. This conflict can best be seen when it occurs between the holders of a personal, complex perspective of the war, Vietnam veterans, experts, historians, and those others who have little prior experience with it either physically or intellectually. Thus the Vietnam veteran may warn his son about *Platoon* or *Apocalypse Now*, "well, it's only a movie." But his son, often no matter what his veteran father says, may have based his understanding of Vietnam and combat on his singular dominant experience of that war--a Hollywood film. His father may fall prey to another example of human arrogance, the belief that one man's experience is representative of an entire place or time.

Once we realize that art, particularly Hollywood cinema, deals with factual history and transcendent truth simultaneously, and often functions allegorically and realistically within the same film, scene, even frame, then the more fruitful our discussions about the proximity to truth in each of these works. We must heed Paul Tillich's admonition to never let our finite metaphors, symbols, and myths overshadow what these forms point to--the infinite and the transcendent--in this case, Vietnam (572-74).

*Platoon* touched some veterans powerfully; others it entertained; some it angered with its version of "the Vietnam experience." But to force any single film to define Vietnam for America is to ask the impossible. That we even ask the impossible of our Vietnam films,



illuminates the cultural void those films are being forced to fill and our urge to empower narrative fiction with the power of perfect representationalism. *Platoon* is not a definitive history of the Vietnam War; it is an emotionally heightened, special-effected, dramatized, Dolbyized, condensed, narrated, big-budgeted view of Vietnam with Samuel Barber's powerful and mesmerizing, "Adagio for Strings" playing behind nearly every scene, melting our hearts. *Platoon* may have come as close as any American film to that experience called the Vietnam War, but it was not the equivalent of a tour of duty, nor an intellectual shortcut to the billions of historical facts that compose our written record of that war.

The fact is, *Platoon* goes further in defining current American ideological attitudes toward the Vietnam War and current American expectations of popular, dramatic film, than it ever does in defining Vietnam. Much as the first American epic *Birth of a Nation* represented "the true story" of the Civil War and Reconstruction for many Southern whites (and Northerners for that matter) so too does *Platoon* represent "the true story" of Vietnam for opponents of that war. *Birth of a Nation* was, much like *Platoon*, praised by historians and authorities of the day for its historicity and its realism. And, there were also those dissenters in the early part of the century who found the film stereotyped and distorted. Ideology and art were, once again, in debate. *Birth of a Nation's* portrayal of slavery as a warm, cozy institution, the Plantation Illusion, also perpetuated in *Gone With the Wind*, has now been supplanted with the bleaker vision of Plantation life

that *Roots*, and works like it, have brought us (Carter 357). New narratives, like political parties, come and go in societies.

Finally, there seems no compromise, no middle-ground where the two opposing critical camps of *Platoon* can meet. The closest any critic came to reconciling this contentious critical dilemma was to dismiss *Platoon* as merely a movie and to acknowledge the film as a reflection of one largely held view of the war. Perhaps when we have many, many more Vietnam films to choose from we will be able to see *Platoon* as just one filmic vision of Vietnam. Even now, *Hamburger Hill* and *Hanoi Hilton* have been adopted by the political right and by a good number of film critics as motion pictures which finally get Vietnam "right." *Rambo* answered *Apocalypse Now*, *Platoon* answered *Rambo*, *Hamburger Hill* answered *Platoon*. The cycle will, no doubt, continue. *Platoon*, like all the Vietnam films, is as much an ideological vehicle as an entertainment vehicle. But dismissing the Vietnam films as merely movies would be to deny the importance and influence of a powerfully persuasive and captivating medium. And would be to deny the power of collective narratives to touch the collective consciousness with their art and ideology.

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## APPENDIX

### RESEARCH METHODOLOGY AND BIBLIOGRAPHICAL SOURCES

To even begin a discussion of a film as a collective narrative it is necessary to collect as much popular discussion of that film as possible. With *Platoon* I collected over sixty reviews and commentaries on the film. This selection, not exhaustive, from the popular press represented a broad and diverse ideological collection. Reviews were obtained from such magazines as *The New Republic* and *The New Leader*, and from such newspapers as *The Washington Post* and *The Daily Oklahoman*. It seems the appropriate duty of the historical critic to find almost anything and everything which relates to his particular study. Like discussions of film genre, historical film criticism does not allow a selective sampling, but requires as broad a collection as possible of the popular, national sentiment.

The closest critical paper found that dealt specifically with the issue of *Platoon's* realism was Thomas Prasch's "*Platoon and the Mythology of Realism*" from the book *Search and Clear: Critical Responses to Selected Literature and Films of the Vietnam War* (Bowling Green: Bowling Green State University Popular Press, 1988). Prasch's is an excellent and detailed dissection of *Platoon's* "surface realism." Prasch's central thesis is that the real ideology behind *Platoon* is the glorification of the warrior hero. Thus, he also stresses the ideological roots for the film.

Two books which do excellent jobs of tracing the ties between film and history are *American History/American Film* (New York: Frederick Unger Publishing Co., 1979) and *Hollywood as Historian: American Film in a Cultural Context* (Lexington: UP of Kentucky, 1983). Both books contain critical essays which place films as diverse as *Steamboat 'Round the Bend*, *Who's Afraid of Virginia Wolf*, and *Apocalypse Now* into their respective historical contexts. These two books and the twenty-seven essays they include provide examples of the concerns and issues of historical film criticism.

Albert Auster's and Leonard Quart's contribution to the Vietnam film is *How the War was Remembered: Hollywood and Vietnam* (New York: Praeger, 1988). This book looks at the complete range of Vietnam films in their social contexts. After an overview of the early war film, Auster and Quart discuss the Vietnam films chronologically from *China Gate* (1957) to *Full Metal Jacket* (1987). Although slanted ideologically itself, the book is of interest to genre critics in that it provides a sub-genre framework in which to place the many Vietnam films and characters: the "Wounded Hero," the "Superman," the "Hunter-Hero," and the "Survivor." Tracing these conventionalized characterizations is the book's greatest contribution to Vietnam film scholarship. *How the War Was Remembered* basically follows the pattern of Paul Fussell's *The Great War and Modern Memory* (London: Oxford UP, 1975) in that it explores collective memory and its relationship to art. Fussell deals with the British conception and memory of WWI while Auster and Quart deal with America's conception and memory of Vietnam.

Gilbert Adair's *Vietnam on Film: From the Green Berets to Apocalypse*

*Now* (New York: Proteus Books, 1981) misses the second important wave of Vietnam combat films, but makes some interesting contributions in that it covers even the biker films and low-budget movies that contain Vietnam elements in them. Adair's work is highly subjective and as politicized as one is likely to find. There are photographs on virtually every page and this is only one hint that the book is aimed at both the coffee-table audience and coffeehouse crowd. Alternately philosophical and "popular," the book is an odd, disjointed thing. But Adair provides enough flashes of intelligence along the way to make the book worth reading. Those interested in the important early Vietnam films should also look into Adair's work since he has included long and thought provoking discussions of *The Green Berets*, *The Deer Hunter*, and *Apocalypse Now*.

Julian Smith's *Looking Away: Hollywood and Vietnam* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1975) is an even earlier work which devotes much of its time to *The Green Berets*. Smith makes light of the fact that he has written a book about Hollywood and Vietnam when, at that time, there was only one film to talk about. But Smith goes far beyond Wayne's "western" rendition of Vietnam. Using quotes from Hollywood insiders, military figures, political figures, and snatches of American film and mythology, Smith reveals the strange relationship between Hollywood and war. His book is as embellished and creative as a novel, but it does seem to capture the popular feeling of that troubled time in America.

Two books that do not deal with film, but are worth exploring for their insights into America's artistic conceptions of the Vietnam War are "*Reading the Wind:*" *The Literature of the Vietnam War* (Durham: Duke UP,

1987) and *American Literature and the Experience of Vietnam* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1982). Many of the same issues of characterization, realism, historical accuracy, and ideology come up in each book as the much larger canon of Vietnam fiction is discussed. *"Reading the Wind"* is really two books in one. The first section is an "interpretive critique" of a conference sponsored by The Asia Society. Timothy J. Lomperis' "critique" of the intellectual wrangling that took place at "The Vietnam Experience in American Literature" conference in 1985 is entertaining and enlightening. With many of the big names of Vietnam fiction in attendance--James Webb, Ron Kovic, John Del Vecchio--the conference was both contentious and revealing. The second section of *"Reading the Wind"* is devoted to a "Bibliographical Commentary" on Vietnam fiction by John Clark Pratt. Pratt's extensive knowledge and reading of the war's literature serves him well in this broad outline of the genre. *American Literature and the Experience of Vietnam* is Philip D. Beidler's more conventional review of the Vietnam literary canon.

The best book to trace the Mythic landscape of Vietnam is John Hellmann's *American Myth and the Legacy of Vietnam* (New York: Columbia UP, 1986). Hellmann argues that American's Frontier myth was channeled into Southeast Asia, Vietnam becoming one avenue for Kennedy's "New Frontier." Hellmann provides thought-provoking discussions of *The Green Berets*, *Apocalypse Now*, and the most famous literature of the war are analyzed from the perspective of the American Frontier Myth. This is the best book around for understanding the American mythic landscape that helped send us to Vietnam and was then battered and inverted by Vietnam.

One of the best books in which to find a detailed examination of films depicting war is Jeanine Basinger's comprehensive *The World War II Combat Film: Anatomy of a Genre* (New York: Columbia UP, 1986). This work is valued for its discussion of genre as well as its status as *the* book on WWII combat film. Basinger's text includes a valuable filmography, notes, and various film lists.

These major sources were then used to shed light on the bewildering array of popular reviews and critical essays I had read on the Vietnam film. Beidler's and Lomperis' books on Vietnam literature helped me see that many of the ideological and artistic debates the Vietnam films had created were also to be heard about the literary fiction of the war. Prasch's critical discussion of *Platoon's* realism helped solidify a thesis already "in production" as well as offer one more ideological review of the film. Basinger's work on the WWII film offered the information and ideas necessary to see *Platoon* in its historical, cinematic tradition. Adair's book offered some brief, but stimulating comments on the "mythologizing of history." And Auster and Quart's book showed how a number of Vietnam films "fit" into American culture as well as to provide me with yet other examples of ideological/aesthetic criticism of Vietnam War films. Going back to the many popular reviews of *Platoon* then confirmed for me my central thesis that *Platoon's* politics and art were inseparable and that the film spoke powerfully to the collective American conscious.

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